

Overcome Indifference and Win Peace Liverpool, 17 January 2016

It is a privilege to be here with you today. Today marks my last day as director of Jesuit Refugee Service UK after 15 and a half years. Today also happens to be the World Day of Prayer for migrants and refugees, which may be one of the reasons why I have been invited to speak here.

The theme I have been asked to address in this talk is “Overcome Indifference and Win Peace”, the theme for World Peace Day.

It is a large topic for a lecture of around 40 minutes or so. Inevitably i will not be able to cover everything I might want to, but I do hope to be able to give you an overview of perhaps some of the intersection between this theme and some of the experience of the people we have accompanied and whom I have known over the last 15 and a half years.

The sad reality is that year on year the most common reason for people to flee their homes and sometimes their countries is war or armed conflict. The second most frequent reason is natural disaster, whether that be famine, flood, earthquake, volcanic eruption and so on. What most of us don't realise is that people fleeing war and generalised violence, or those fleeing natural disaster are not ordinarily considered to be refugees under the law.

Who is a refugee? - Legal Definition

1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, art. 1(A)2:

- **The person is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence**
- **The person is unwilling/unable to seek protection from that country**
- **Because of a well-founded fear of persecution**
- **Due to race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion**

Human Rights Act means that those facing torture or inhuman treatment may also be granted refugee status in the UK

(slide 1)

The legal definition of a refugee is very specific. You will see it paraphrased on the slide. It requires a well-founded fear of persecution - and persecution is by definition not generalised - based on the five reasons detailed. The definition is both subjective and objective and carries an inherent tension as a result. Fear is very subjective. What frightens me is very different from what might frighten the next person. That fear does have to be well-founded, that is demonstrated objectively; not many people have the presence of mind to bring evidence of persecution with them when they leave their countries.

Who is a refugee? - Church Definition

Core document:

Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity 1992

Synthesis of 100 years of social teaching

- Geneva Convention plus
- those fleeing armed conflicts,
- natural disasters or erroneous economic policy (which threatens their lives and physical safety)
- outside or inside their own countries

(slide 2)

Contrast that to the church definition of a refugee. It is more inclusive because it takes account of peoples' lives and circumstances. The church had the time to reflect on 100 years of social teaching to develop this definition and it reflects a more rounded understanding of the many reasons why a person might be forced to flee. The crucial thing is not being able to live with dignity and so being forced to move.

The Refugee Convention was a groundbreaking human rights document of its time. In fact I think we would be hard pushed to get anything as good in this day and age should governments only be debating it now. However, it is also a child of its time - of the cold war and the setting up on the international stage of the two superpower blocs and their era of influence and diplomacy. The focus on individual persecution and for those five reasons was critical - it allowed refugees to be lauded as visible moral validators of a particular type of regime or society, very much a case of pointing out how morally bankrupt the way of life of another country. Political relativism triumphed over the need to protect individuals and to promote dignity of the person.

In the message for World Peace Day, Pope Francis writes: "Clearly indifference is not something new; every period of history has known people who close their hearts to the needs of others, who close their eyes to what is happening around them, who turn aside to avoid encountering other peoples' problems. But in our day, indifference has ceased to be a purely personal matter and has taken on broader dimensions, producing a certain globalisation of indifference".

In some ways that can be seen most starkly in the way we regard refugees and migrants. Each year thousands of people die using unsafe routes to get to safety or the opportunity for a better life in Europe. Anywhere around 2,500 - 3,500 deaths each year for the last few years have been documented because of people having to use overcrowded and unsafe boats to get across the Mediterranean. It was an open secret that was rarely acknowledged or spoken about even among organisations working with or helping refugees, except for in Spain or Italy really.

What changed was the scale of conflict close to Europe and in particular in Syria. And, of course, there was one moment of clarity - almost a perfect moment - in the reporting of and the photographs of the death of Aylan Kurdi, the toddler washed up on the beach. It took the images of his father's grief and the way in which the boy's body was carried from the water to shake a continent and to really bring to the notice of the public in Europe the risks refugees and migrants were taking to get to safety.

Suddenly public opinion changed - with more sympathy being shown for people having to flee to Europe.



(Slide 3)

Media reporting and political statements changed in tenor almost from one day to the next as well. Up until that point there was increasing concern about the numbers of people coming to Europe looking for safety and not in a good way. There was increasingly inflammatory language being used by some commentators, some journalists and politicians. Territoriality and wanting to protect what we have took over the debate. Some very racist language was used, including that awful statement by Katie Hopkins likening the migrants to insects swarming across the Mediterranean. There were discussions about stopping rescues at sea as it was considered by some governments, our own included, that the possibility of a sea rescue could be a pull-factor, encouraging migrants to come to Europe.

The next two slides show two different maps from two different sources.



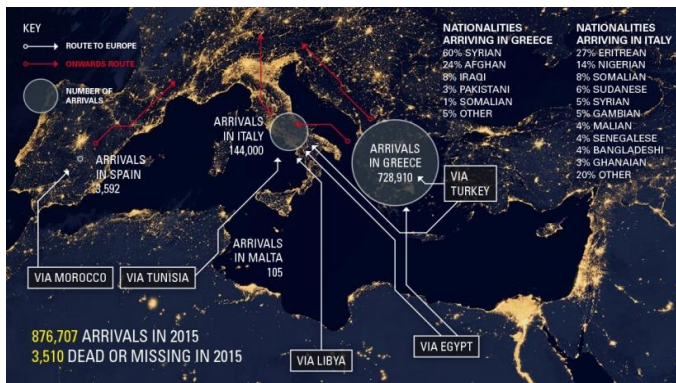
(slide 4)

The first is a map showing the numbers of entries by the central and Eastern Mediterranean routes published two days ago by the European Union as part of their reporting on what objectives have been met in dealing with arrivals to Europe and as part of their ongoing planning process. You will see that more than a million people arrived by those two routes, with the vast majority arriving in the last 6 months. The red and blue lines are the routes people have taken to get to Europe and then to move on after arrival.

The next slide is one put together by Professor Heaven Crawley of Coventry University at the end of November. She has taken a NASA image and put key data on top. It is interesting as it details the Western Mediterranean route (via Morocco) and because she has pulled together the data of deaths through these routes (3510 dead or missing up until that point, but these are only what is known when wreckage is found - we have no way of knowing how many boats have sunk to the bottom of the Mediterranean with all lives lost if no debris, no bodies or no survivors at all are found). According to her research around 85% of all arrivals are coming from conflict situations - and that number rises to 93% via the Eastern Mediterranean route.

More than a million people coming to Europe seems like a lot. However, UNHCR told us last year that there were more than 60 million refugees globally, more than 86% of whom were being looked after in region of origin or by countries of the south. 10 years ago only 70% were in refugee camps or were urban refugees in regions of origin, demonstrating how much more difficult it is for refugees to get to Europe now. As an example Lebanon, a country half the size of Wales has 1 million refugees in camps (mostly Syrians) - with some saying the number unofficially may be as high as 1.3 million. The local infrastructure is unable to cope. JRS works in some of the camps in Lebanon. Originally they were to provide educational services - to teach the Syrian children French so that they could be integrated into the local school system at the end of a year. Unfortunately so many children arrived that the Lebanese authorities realised that they could not accommodate all of the children and so the services JRS provide had to change to a more long term one, of providing schooling in the camps themselves and not moving students on after a year.

UNHCR tells us that around half of the 60 million refugees globally are children.

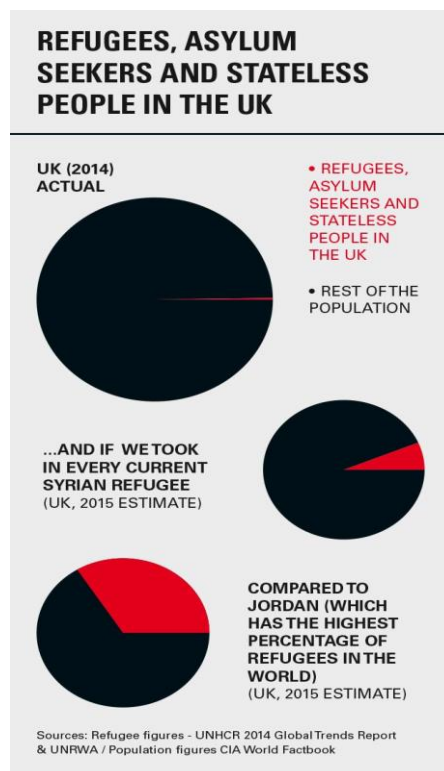


(slide 5)

The pie charts behind me show the disparity between where refugees are hosted quite markedly. The red line in the top chart shows proportionally how many refugees and asylum seekers the UK has (actual figures from 2014) compared to the rest of the population. The middle one shows what the relative proportion would be if we took every single Syrian refugee - all 4 million of them who have left their country. And the bottom pie chart shows the proportion of refugees relative to the host population in Jordan, now. Jordan is the country with the highest proportion of refugees to citizens in the world.

To put all of this in further perspective - In the first half of last year there were 25,771 asylum claims (only up 10% on the previous year), with the top three nationalities being Eritrea, Pakistan and Syria - accounting for almost a third of those applications.

Previous map and pie charts to the right sourced from article by Prof Heaven Crawley, December 2015



(slide 6)

I have probably overwhelmed you with a whole load of facts and figures. The following slides show some photos of people and what it means to walk to try to find safety.

One of my colleagues at JRS International, Kristof, took part in some of the journey with some of the people who had been stuck in Keleti station in Budapest, Hungary and then their road journey and bus journey to Austria and Germany.

Hopefully this brings us back to the human a little as again the tone of the debate is turning, at least politically and also among some sectors of the media. Some of the language being used is at best prejudiced and at worst amounts to hate speech - just think back to Katie Hopkins or some of the sentiments we might have heard on radio talk shows.

Regardless it is contrary to the common good and consequently to the promotion of peace. The common good can be many things to different people. Broadly speaking the common good represents the idea that we all have the same rights to exercise the use of the public or common space regardless of our differences and on the same basis of entitlement. There are arguments philosophically about how common the common good is - and whether it is really only common for those of us who identify ourselves as being part of the same group. I would hope that in this forum and for people of faith we would accept that the common good is held by more than a limited interest group (such as all Christians) and is more universal than that, depending on the integral dignity of the human person. Messages shape the shared meaning we have as a society that constitutes our shared space. Hate speech makes it harder for a targeted group to live in the shared space or participate in the common life. It undermines the shared meaning we might have of the common good and undermines the values underpinning the use of the common space.

Again Pope Francis sums this up rather neatly in his message to us for the World Day of Peace: "indifference and lack of commitment constitute a grave dereliction of the duty whereby each of us must work in accordance with our abilities and our role in society for the promotion of the common good, and in particular for peace, which is one of mankind's most precious goods".

Pope Francis goes on to call for a "conversion of our hearts" - movement from indifference to mercy. He tells us that "Mercy is the heart of God. It must also be the heart of the members of the one great family of his children: a heart which beats all the more strongly wherever human dignity - as a reflection of the face of God in his creatures - is in play. Jesus tells us that love for others - foreigners, the sick, prisoners, the homeless, even our enemies - is the yardstick by which God will judge our actions." So compassion, love, mercy and solidarity are not to be words we mouth, but values by which we live. This is how to combat indifference and bring about peace.

What feels like a million years ago sometimes, I was an idealistic and in some ways rather shallow teenager. I was 17 when I went to university and chose to study law so that I could change the world. Having left university, lost some arrogance and gained a little wisdom over the years I now know that I cannot change the world - but we can. I can change myself and how I live my life. Together we can hold ourselves to higher ideals and live our lives based on meaningful values: dignity, solidarity, compassion, hope, generosity, charity, justice and mercy.

One of the greatest challenges we face is not only countering prejudice and hate speech but also countering the discourse of scarcity. How many times over the last few years have we heard from politicians that austerity is the reason for one cut or another. It has become a prevailing theme for our times. That discourse of scarcity is exclusive, limiting, competitive and territorial. It allows us to cut asylum support for asylum seeking families as proposed in the immigration bill currently going through parliament. It allows European governments to build razor wire fences along their borders. It allows us to think that a £12 million fence at Calais is a reasonable response to protect us from refugees and migrants leaving the jungle there to get to the UK - all 4,500 of them. The discourse of scarcity is ultimately resistant to the dignity and humanity of others.

We need to counter this argument with a theology of abundance, which is inherently inclusive. If we accept that everything in the material world is a gift from God in order that we might grow in

communion with Him then we have to stop thinking in terms of limiting the access of others to that gift. Cuts in services for the poorer and more vulnerable members of society becomes unacceptable. Building fences around a gift we have been given and are expected to share in solidarity is at odds with the relationship in which together we grow.

One of the greatest challenges I have faced in the last 15 and a half years is the remarkable generosity of spirit of the people we accompany at JRS. The people we work with, whom we accompany and serve, are among the poorest and most marginalised individuals in the UK. They are either completely isolated - held in detention centres, which are similar to prisons - on an arbitrary and indefinite basis with no automatic judicial oversight; or they have been left destitute by the asylum process, with no access to benefits, no permission to work, completely reliant on charity.

I consider myself to be one of the most fortunate people in this country because I get to work with these remarkable groups of people. Seven years ago my husband suddenly died. Our refugee friends at JRS literally walked across London to bring me out of the nothing that they have cards, food, sympathy and prayers. Because my health is not great and my mobility is unpredictable at best they are constantly checking up on me, bringing me tea and coffee, making sure that someone carries my bags to and from the tube station. Cautiously to stop me complaining about being fussed over they gradually took on these roles over a period of time. I no longer even think of complaining as they like to have the opportunity to help and behave in normally.

It is a lovely model of society - and deeply counter cultural. It is based on being in right relationship with each other and with God. Being in right relationship means that it is impossible to be indifferent towards each other, it is impossible to not be inclusive and welcoming.

So what have I learned from the people we accompany, from our volunteers, from our donors and supporters over the years that we do to overcome indifference and therefore bring about a different society.

1. Sharing information and resources. By far the most common way refugees find JRS is by word of mouth - another refugee will tell them about us. They know at least at some level that at some point our hardship and travel grant money may very well run out. But they tell others because we help in different ways. They also know that the small amounts of money they get from us to attend appointments, the toiletry parcels, the occasional food parcels, the hot lunch at our day centre are not going to fundamentally resolve all their problems. They come to see us week in and week out, attend activities (drama workshops, peer groups, prayer groups, bicycle training, and so on) and receive some practical help because they feel like they are part of a family with us. They get to share their lives. Too many other organisations are only interested in their asylum claims. With us they can talk about how their children are doing in school, any joys or good news they have, as well as sadnesses and frustrations. Those who are detained are constantly introducing more vulnerable individuals to our volunteer chaplains or bring them along to our weekly welfare surgeries at Harmondsworth and Colnbrook. How can we do any less. Would it be so incomprehensible to share resources we might have access to with refugees and migrants coming to
2. Knowledge is important. My colleagues and I spend a good part of every day centre or welfare surgery countering rumours of potential amnesties; nasty changes to legislation; rumours of mass deportations of one particular nationality or another by charter flight. Fear can run rampant. Think about what we hear regularly about the dangers of letting refugees or migrants into the UK or how we will be financially worse off. Therefore keep informed and make your own mind up about what you hear or read. It is impossible to be indifferent to the lived realities that the refugees face so in particular read or listen to personal testimonies. Make those opportunities available to others. The best way I have found of converting hearts towards mercy and compassion over the years is through the courage of our refugee friends in the telling of their own stories. It needs to be done in a dignified way and offering as much support as possible.

3. Every single person in this room has time to give towards building a better and more peaceful society. Whether detained or destitute, the people we accompany spend an inordinate amount of time every day trying to survive. Trying to secure legal representation, trying to get a healthcare appointment in a detention centre, running around between day centre's trying to get as much practical assistance as possible, with all of the frustrations this entails. And yet they make time to attend classes, to help each other, to pray together, to volunteer formally or informally. We can do no less. At the very least every single person here can pray for peace and pray for refugees. We can also pray for the openness of mind to change our own hearts and make perhaps one small change in our own lives. If you have more time then consider volunteering at a local refugee centre. There is an excellent one in Liverpool - Asylum Link Merseyside base at St Anne's in Kensington.
4. We should all smile more. Despite the circumstances they find themselves in I have never met a group of more cheerful people than those who attend our day centre. Normally people come in with huge smiles - sometimes it is a cover for their sadness and they don't want to upset the volunteers and staff team. But mostly it is a genuine sense of joy in shared friendship, community and friendship. Smiling and speaking a few words of welcome can mean the world to someone who is lonely or isolated or who spends their week wondering if anyone ever really sees them or not. A few weeks ago an elderly Eritrean man came to our centre for the first time. He burst into tears because it was the first time in a week that anyone at all had said anything to him or even just smiled at him. The detention centres are very different in this respect.
5. Gifts. I explained that I received unexpected gifts when my husband died. Most of the refugees I work with are surprised and amazed that complete strangers donate money or other gifts to supporting people they don't know, especially given what they read or hear in the media, from politicians and from some members of the public. When you give a gift or even if you cannot give materially do send a message of support. It means the world.
6. Lobbying and campaigning. Last year there was an inquiry into the use of immigration detention. The single most influential part of the cross party inquiry was the testimony by phone to the first oral hearing from three detainees in Colnbrook. You could see the looks of disbelief on the MPs faces when they heard the testimony. It was extremely courageous, as each of those individuals did not know what impact their testimony might have on their continued detention or their claims to stay in the UK. We have a responsibility to speak truth to power. It is up to us to contact our MPs and let them know what the impact of prospective legislation and current legislation is on people's lives. The new immigration bill is going to bring in enhanced landlord checks, withdraw support from some asylum seeking families, and make it even more difficult for families to be reunited amongst other things.
7. Hospitality.
8. Refugee resettlement.